Trustee Essential 11

Planning for the Library's Future

This Trustee Essential covers:

- *The importance of planning*
- *Planning essentials—getting started*
- *A plan outline*
- *Where to go for help*

The importance of planning: why plan?

How often do you leave for the grocery store without a list and come back with dozens of items you didn't need, but without the one or two things you absolutely needed? Nobody would ever think of building a house or starting a business without a plan. Yet it is often hard to convince library directors and library boards to create a long-range plan. The most frequent excuse is "We don't have time" or "We are too busy getting our work done."

Information technology, publishing and the book industry, and society itself are in the middle of the greatest series of changes since the invention of the printing press. In 1990, few libraries had computers. Now, they are everywhere. In 1980, women were just entering the workforce in large numbers, and many smaller Wisconsin communities had few, if any, minority residents. Library services need to change to reflect changes in our communities. They cannot exist in a vacuum. The library board or director that refuses to plan is like the shopper going to the store without a shopping list. The library may well be offering dozens of services that are not really needed by the community, while failing to offer the one or two services that might provide a great benefit.

Planning for libraries is a process of envisioning the future of both the community and the library and setting a direction for library movement toward a chosen future vision. Planning helps the staff and board understand the situation of their community, set priorities, and establish methods for achieving those priorities. The planning document provides a record of the decisions made during that process. The document also becomes a guide for decision-making and action by staff and the board.

Planning essentials—getting started

Size doesn't matter. Every library needs a plan, no matter how small or how large the library and community may be. However, just as a shopping list will be different for the single person and the family of ten, the *process* followed to create a plan will depend on the size of library and community involved with the project. Large and even many medium-sized libraries, or those libraries accustomed to planning, may have the resources and experience to undertake a full-blown process such as that described in *Planning for Results.*[1] *Planning for Results* provides a blueprint for creating a vision of the future for a library and its community, along with a blueprint for creating the services that will enable a library achieve its vision. *Planning for Results*, because it is so thorough, describes a fairly time-

[1] Wilson, William James, et al. *Planning for Results: A Public Library Transformation Process.* ALA, 1998

intensive process involving a large cast of players. Any library, including smaller libraries or those new to planning, will benefit from undertaking the process outlined in *Planning for Results* if its board and staff have the commitment, time, and resources to follow through. However, for novice planners, the process is less important than the fact that planning is carried out. First-time planners often want to follow a simplified process that is less time-intensive. Even a simplified process will help the board and staff gain vital information about the library and community, as well as the experience and confidence needed to expand the process during the next planning cycle.

Who should be involved?

The minimum number needed to draft a long-range plan is one. However, just as the grocery shopper benefits from consulting spouse and family before leaving for the store, the long-range plan for the library benefits from input from multiple individuals. The library director, with the help of system staff, can be relied on to gather statistics about a community. Important statistics include:

- Population size of community broken down by age, gender, racial heritage, etc.
- The existence of large or growing groups of newcomers to the community, whether they be urban or rural transplants, new ethnic groups, or other.
- Economic factors regarding the community, such as household incomes and source of payrolls.
- Educational profile of the community.

At the same time, the director and staff can gather facts about the library. Questions to ask include:

- What services are currently being offered?
- How have usage patterns been changing in the past few years?
- What is the composition of the collection? How many books does the library own? How many books on tape? Videos? Children's books, etc.?
- What is the *age* of the collection? What is the average publication date for each section of the nonfiction collection?

By discussing these and similar facts about the library and the community, the staff and board can come to some basic conclusions about the library on which to plan future services. A library with a small large-print collection in a community with a stable, aging population may want to buy more large-print books, for example. A science collection with relatively few titles less than one or two years old probably needs updating.

One of the best ways to gather insight regarding your library is to see how it stacks up against current state recommended standards. *Wisconsin Public Library Standards* is updated about every five years. The Standards are not mandatory requirements from the state; rather they are suggestions for basic levels of service organized by library or community size. They suggest such things as basic collection size for a specific community size. They even recommend a minimum funding requirement for a basic level of library service in the smallest communities. The Standards allow planners to look beyond the confines of their community. (For more information, see *Trustee Essential #12: Library Standards*.)

By talking to other stakeholders, library planners can add to the strength and reliability of their plan as well as obtain buy-in from the public. There is an endless list of individuals and groups that *might* be consulted as part of a basic planning process. Which ones you choose will depend on your particular situation. Suggested players include:

- The mayor and city council (or equivalent)
- Municipal employees such as an economic development officer, senior center director, or recreation department director
- Representatives from the PTA and/or teachers union
- Representatives of active service groups such as Elks, Rotary, or Lions
- Representatives of other social/service organizations such as those representing growing minority populations
- Representatives of the religious community
- Current library users
- Those not currently using the library

You get the picture. The more people you talk to about the community, the more information you will have to create your long-range plan.

How do you gather information?

Probably the most common mistake library planners make when consulting the community in preparation for a long-range plan is to ask people about the library. Neophyte planners ask what library services people are looking for. The real purpose of consulting all of these community representatives is to find out about *them*—what *they* are doing and what is important in *their* lives and work. The library staff and board are the experts in the broad array of possible library services. It is up to the experts to be creative in proposing new services or changes in services to meet emerging needs. The mayor and city council may be interested in developing tourism in a community, but they may never think of the library as a vehicle for collecting and disseminating local information of interest to tourists. If you ask someone what the library should be like, they will answer based on their preconceptions about what a library is. Instead, inquire about community needs and then apply library resources to fashion the services to help the community fill those needs.

There are a variety of ways to ask this large array of players about community needs. One of the simplest but most effective is simply to invite them to the library or a neutral site and talk to them. Find someone who is experienced in conducting focus group interviews. Construct one or more groups built around particular interests, such as the needs of children in the community or the needs of immigrants. Assist the interviewer in eliciting the opinions of interested parties regarding what is important to them.

Library planners probably most often gather information by means of surveys. If you decide to use a survey, consider the following:

- What is the specific question you are trying to answer? What hypothesis are you testing?
- Don't ask questions simply for the sake of asking. If you ask whether the respondent went to college, for example, how will having the information affect your investigation? How will you use the information?

- Will your survey reach the target audience? Surveys done in the library are useless for learning the needs and opinions of nonusers. Current library users do not necessarily represent a cross section of the community.
- How will your survey be distributed?
- How will your survey be tabulated?
- Do a pretest. Make sure that your respondents have the same understanding of the questions you do.

Again, consider enlisting the help of someone experienced in writing and conducting surveys before you get started. This doesn't have to cost anything. You may find a volunteer at a local chamber of commerce or a nearby university, or a local resident may be willing to help who has conducted surveys as part of his or her business. Your local library system should be able to offer assistance. If you write your own survey, at the very least have someone critique it for you. A poorly executed survey can have less value than no survey at all. It may even lead you to opposite conclusions from those you might have reached otherwise.

A plan outline

Okay, you've gathered all your information. What do you do with it? A simple plan might be organized like this:

Introduction:	Discuss the planning process: Who are you? What are your library and community like? How did you find this out? Who did you consult? How did you consult them? What did you find?
Mission Statement:	What vision of the community are you are trying to support? What is the library's role in supporting that vision? What is the reason the library exists? (See *Sources of Additional Information* below for information about developing a mission statement.)
Service Responses:	What are the specific services you will offer and, why?
Activities:	Under each service, list the particular activities that will be carried out and what you intend to accomplish. How do these activities relate to the mission of the library?
Evaluation:	How will you measure the impact these services are having on the target population? How do you know if you are doing it right? What are your alternatives if you are not?

The specific time frame your plan should cover will depend on how ambitious your plan is, or how many activities you hope to carry out. There is no magic formula that dictates that your plan should last five years, three years, or even one year. Do what makes sense for your library and your community. The most important thing you can do is to be adaptive. Follow your plan and revisit it along the way. Make sure it is taking you where you want to go, and revise it as necessary. At the end of the planning cycle, when all evaluations are in, start over. Create a new plan and perhaps go a little farther in your information-gathering process.

Special types of planning

In addition to general long-range planning for the entire library, you may also want to consider planning projects focusing on special issues such as technology or disaster preparedness.

Many libraries participate in technology planning through their library system and therefore do not need to conduct their own technology planning project. Because new technologies can greatly expand the services and resources offered by a library, it is important that all libraries be involved in some type of technology planning.

Most libraries will rarely experience a severe emergency or natural disaster, but it is best to be prepared, just in case. Fires, floods, tornadoes, and hazardous material accidents can endanger lives, and it is important for libraries to have plans and/or policies in place for dealing with these types of emergencies. It is also important for staff to be trained to handle emergencies properly, including medical emergencies.

Plans and/or policies can also be established to prepare for recovery of library materials after an accident or disaster. The Wisconsin Public Library Policy Resources Page (at http://www.dpi.state.wi.us/dltcl/pld/policies.html) has links to examples of emergency and disaster policies. See below for resources to help with accident and disaster preparedness planning.

Discussion Questions:

1. Has your library had a plan before? What did it deal with? When was it done?

2. Who should be involved on the ground floor? Which staff members? Which board members? Who is available with the necessary expertise, including outside volunteers, that might be able to help with the plan?

3. What resources does your library system have to assist you with planning?

4. Are there any other plans out there that you might consult (e.g., a comprehensive development plan written for the municipality; a comprehensive plan written for the school system; any plan written by the chamber of commerce)?

5. What do you hope to accomplish? What will you do with the plan once it is written?

6. How does your library compare with other libraries in similar communities? Do you meet or exceed recommended state standards?

7. Can your library system obtain samples of other long-range plans for your committee to look at? After examining them, ask, What was good about them? What didn't you like?

Sources of Additional Information:

Your library system staff (see *Trustee Tool B: Library System Map and Contact Information*)

Wisconsin Public Library Standards, Chapter 1*,* available at http://www.dpi.state.wi.us/dltcl/pld/chapter1.html

OWLS web page on planning at http://www.owls.lib.wi.us/info/links/plans.htm

McClure, Charles R., et al. *Planning and Role Setting for Public Libraries: A Manual of Options and Procedures*. Chicago, IL: ALA, 1987.

Nelson, Sandra. *The New Planning for Results: A Streamlined Approach*. Chicago, IL: ALA, 2001.

Van House, Nancy A., et al. *Output Measures for Public Libraries: A Manual of Standardized Procedures,* 2nd ed. Chicago, IL: ALA, 1987.

Wilson, William James, et al. *Planning for Results: A Public Library Transformation Process.* Chicago, IL: American Library Association, 1998.

Zweizig, Douglas, et al. *Evaluating Library Programs & Services: TELL IT!* Madison, WI: UW School of Library and Information Studies, 1993.

Disaster Preparedness Clearinghouse web site (http://www.ala.org/alcts/publications/disaster.html), developed by the Association for Library Collections & Technical Services, a division of the American Library Association

Western New York Disaster Preparedness and Recovery Manual for Libraries and Archives, Revised edition 1994, Western New York Library Resources Council (at http://www.wnylrc.org/pub/disman.htm)

Conservation OnLine (CoOL), *Disaster Preparedness and Response* (at http://palimpsest.stanford.edu/bytopic/disasters)